



The voluntary national reviews of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*

The Committee reviewed its analysis on the reflection of key principles and cross-cutting issues in the 2018 voluntary national reviews. Among the key findings, the Committee highlighted the fact that, while most countries acknowledge the principle of leaving no one behind, voluntary national reviews often remain vague on how to implement it in practice. Regarding the

reporting on Sustainable Development Goal 17, the Committee raised concern about the fact that certain targets such as policy space and leadership or investment promotion regimes for least developed countries were hardly mentioned. The finding that Goal 10 on reduced inequalities receives the least attention in voluntary national reviews was also met with concern.

Since 2018, the Committee has undertaken an annual review of the voluntary national reviews. Voluntary national reviews are an important innovation and have become a central instrument for follow up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The voluntary national review framework is built around a voluntary, country - led process that is intended to track progress on sustainable development goals; be open and participatory for stakeholders; focus on people, with particular attention to human rights and the people furthest behind; take a long-term perspective; and be rigorous and evidence based. The overall voluntary national review mechanism consists of national consultation processes, regional meetings, main messages summarizing countries' key findings, the presentation of the report at the high-level political forum, as well as voluntary national review labs. The voluntary national reviews are not conceptualized as an accountability mechanism among

States; rather, the aim is to strengthen accountability to citizens as well as to facilitate the sharing of experience, including successes, challenges and lessons learned.

In line with the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda and to ensure continuity with its earlier voluntary national review analyses, the Committee analysed the reflection of the principle of leaving no one behind and the reporting on Sustainable Development Goal 17 on global partnerships and means of implementation. For the analysis of 46 voluntary national reviews presented in July 2018, additional aspects (Goal 4 on quality education) and an overall review of coverage of the Sustainable Development Goals in the voluntary national reviews were added to complement this focus.¹

The Committee found that most reports acknowledge the principle of leaving no one behind, but countries often remain vague on how to implement it in practice.

¹ For details of the analysis, see the dedicated section on the Committee for Development Policy website (www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/voluntary-national-reviews.html).

* Excerpt from Committee for Development Policy, Report on the twenty-second session, See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2020, Supplement No. 13 (E/2020/33)

Moreover, the focus of Agenda 2030 on those furthest behind is not often evident in the references to strategies associated in the voluntary national reviews with leaving no one behind. Among developed countries, the idea of “furthest behind” mostly refers to other countries (typically to least developed countries) rather than to groups within their own country. Among groups recognized to be at risk of being left behind, minorities such as indigenous people and racial, ethnical and religious groups, continue to receive less attention than established groups such as women, children and youth and persons with disabilities.

Moreover, limited reflection is given in the voluntary national reviews to the risks that groups may be “pushed behind” by misguided development policies. Most countries relate leaving no one behind to social protection only, potentially indicating that it is not yet reflected in strategies in other critical areas such as macroeconomic or technology policy strategies. This highlights the need for broader and more robust strategies to ensure the principle of leaving no one behind.

The qualitative analysis on Sustainable Development Goal 17 on global partnerships and means of implementation showed that, while nearly all voluntary national reviews report on it, the reference is often general and does not always address specific targets or indicators. Certain targets such as policy space and leadership (target 17.15) or investment promotion regimes for least developed countries (17.5) are hardly mentioned by any country, rendering them almost “orphaned” targets.

In their reporting on Sustainable Development Goal 4, most countries discuss both education access and education quality issues. However, there are wide variations across countries regarding focus and concrete examples. This underscores the potential of the voluntary national reviews as an entry point for shared learning among countries.

Comparing the attention paid to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals in the voluntary national reviews using machine learning shows that Goal 17 receives most attention, which might reflect not only the breadth of Goal 17 but also that countries see global partnership as central to the 2030 Agenda. Concerningly, Goal 10 on reduced inequalities receives the least attention.

The Committee is encouraged that the findings of its analyses presented at the high-level political forum and related events have been met with considerable interest by member States and other stakeholders. They have not only enriched the global discourse around the voluntary national reviews, but also given the Committee considerable visibility at this central forum on sustainable development.

The Committee will continue its analysis of voluntary national reviews in line with the methodology that it developed for the purpose. For the analysis of the 2019 voluntary national reviews, the focus will remain on leaving no one behind and Sustainable Development Goal 17. In addition, an analysis of how gender issues and inequalities are represented in the voluntary national reviews is envisaged.